Retiring Guns, Holding Blinds & JUDGING INTEGRITY

By John Stracka

It is relatively easy to confuse or mislead a retriever through improper use of gun station mechanics, retirement procedures, and holding blinds. Increasingly, these practices are driving expanded training techniques that may not serve the long-term interests of the sport. The ingenuity encouraged by the Rulebook was never intended to justify arguing ways around clearly stated rules or parsing the words "should" and "shall" in order to justify confusing dogs while marking.

The Rulebook gives Judges and Field Trial Committees broad latitude in test design through the following language contained in the "Supplement to Standard Procedure":

> *"The 'STANDARD' has been formulated in such a manner that the Officials of a trial-giving club and the Judges have considerable latitude in the conduct of a trial. This is desirable to allow for variations in conditions that are peculiar to various parts of the country, and also to grant Judges unlimited opportunities for ingenuity in planning tests."*

That latitude, however, does not authorize departure from specifically stated rules governing marking tests, retired guns, and concealment mechanics.

The elements discussed here are not merely logistical details. They directly affect fairness, test integrity, and the dog's opportunity to demonstrate true marking ability as defined by the Rulebook.

Retirement of Guns

The AKC rules clearly contemplate the use of retired guns as a legitimate method of testing memory and marking accuracy. Retirement changes the visual picture after the bird is thrown by removing the white coat and replacing it with a reasonably concealed station.

However, retirement must preserve the fundamental concept of marking. It should occur only after the throw is completed and in a controlled, predictable manner that minimizes distraction to the dog. Retirement mechanics that introduce excessive

movement, delayed retirements, or visual interference risk transforming a marking test into a near blind-like test emphasizing lining to the fall area and control rather than memory of the fall.

The Rulebook specifically requires that reasonable efforts be made to avoid distracting the dog. Guns visibly walking while a dog is traveling to a mark are inconsistent with both the language and intent of the rules.

Retirement should also occur in a direction away from the area of the throw so the dog's perception of the fall is not materially altered. Retirement toward the bird, across another mark, or in a manner that draws attention away from the fall area introduces artificial interference unrelated to marking ability.

The governing principle is straightforward: retirement should remove the white coat as a cue, not create a false, distracting or moving cue to mislead the dogs.

Minimum Distance for Retirement

The Rulebook states: *"The permitted movement of retired Guns and their associated bird throwers should be limited to the minimum distance required for effective concealment."*

This language is often ignored or reinterpreted in practice.

When a constructed holding blind is used, the minimum distance for concealment is obviously the thrower's position next to the blind. In many situations, the thrower can simply throw the bird and immediately sit down or step directly into the holding blind. Walking any distance is therefore unnecessary, because the location of the blind is totally up to the judges. Anything else is expanding the fall area away from the bird. **Walking guns has become such a common and deceptive practice that further tightening of the rules is needed because Judges and Field Trial Committees are ignoring the very plain language in the existing rule.**

Sometimes a thrower walks very substantial distances after the throw, the movement itself becomes a visual influence that can pull dogs away from the area of the fall. Also in the extreme case, the retirement location itself risks becoming the gun station that has been moved, which is also not allowed by rule.

The Rulebook further reinforces this principle by stating:

"In no circumstances should the judges have the guns move to another position to mislead dogs in their marking."

All guns should therefore throw and when instructed sit down (or retire immediately) with minimal movement (this doesn't mean walking 10, 20, 30 or more yards). Deliberately moving guns away from the fall area to relocate the visual cue of the white coat or holding blind is inconsistent with both the language and intent of the rule.

Holding Blinds and Concealment

Holding blinds serve a limited and specific purpose: concealing gunners/throwers (or hazards) from the dog's view. They are not intended to become distracting visual cues within the marking picture.

The Rulebook also prohibits visible "dry guns" during marking or the marking portion of combination marking and blind tests. Accordingly, holding blinds should be placed only where necessary to accomplish immediate and effective concealment of retired guns.

Effective concealment requires more than partial obstruction. A blind should blend naturally into terrain and vegetation so it does not present a distinct artificial reference point. Poorly concealed blinds can either aid or mislead dogs and undermine evaluation of natural marking ability.

The purpose of holding blinds and concealment is to remove the dogs cue (visual influence of the white coat) from the mark — not replace one marking cue with another in a different location.

Judging Integrity and Marking Clarity

The retirement of guns, direction of retirement, and placement of holding blinds are closely interconnected elements of excellent marking test design. When properly executed, they enhance the test's ability to evaluate true marking ability and memory of the fall. When misapplied, they introduce confusing, artificial factors unrelated to the skill of marking tests.

The governing principle should always be clarity of the mark and mechanics of the test, not confusing the dogs.

Retiring guns is intended to remove the visual influence of the white coat, not distort the fall area with distant cues (holding blinds or long walks) that draw dogs away from the fall of the

RETIRING GUNS, HOLDING BLINDS AND JUDGING INTEGRITY

bird. Holding blinds should conceal, not provide a false and distracting reference points to the dog. Retirement direction and distance should preserve the dog's marking picture, not interfere with it. The location of a holding blind should not become a "factor" our dogs have to be trained to ignore - dogs don't mark that way. It's the same for walking guns - it's happening so often we are training dogs to ignore them - these practices are not aligned with the rules.

Field Trial Committee and Judges adherence to plainly stated and understandable rules and procedures preserves intent, consistency, and the integrity of the sport.

Rulebook Citations

"On marked retrieves, a dog should be able to see each bird in the air and as it falls, and the Guns shall be so stationed as to be conspicuous to and easily identified by the dog."

"No Dry Guns should be stationed in the field and visible to the dog while a marking test is run, or while the marking portion of a combination mark/blind test is run."

"After birds have been shot, all Guns shall remain quiet and shall not move their positions unless and until so instructed by the Judges."

"Judges may instruct Guns and their associated bird thrower to retire from the sight of the dog, or dogs, on line provided that every reasonable effort must be made to insure that the movement of retired Guns is only permitted at a time and under conditions to minimize the chance that the running dog will be distracted by such movements."

"The permitted movement of retired Guns and their associated bird throwers should be limited to the minimum distance required for effective concealment."

"Such retirement should be in a direction away from the direction in which the bird is thrown."

"Retired Guns and throwers should be concealed by a blind that provides complete coverage, adequate space, and natural camouflage to conceal the distinctive shape of the blind."

"The blind must be so located as to minimize the development of a trail that will lead the running dog away from the area of the fall."

"In no circumstances should the judges have the guns move to another position to mislead dogs in their marking." ■

About the Author – John Stracka

John has contributed to our sport through leadership positions with Retriever News, Entry Express, National Clubs, Local Clubs, and as a fundraising liaison for Canine Health Foundation. John has also edited and curated hundreds of articles for Retriever News and has been a major contributor to the Judges Corner since 2010.

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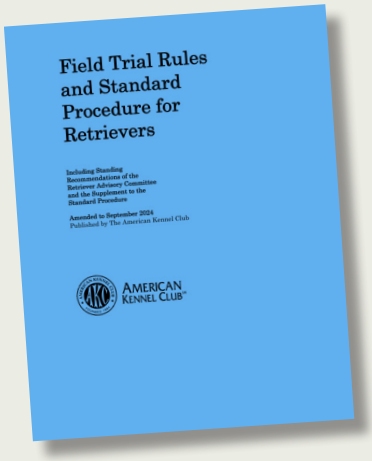

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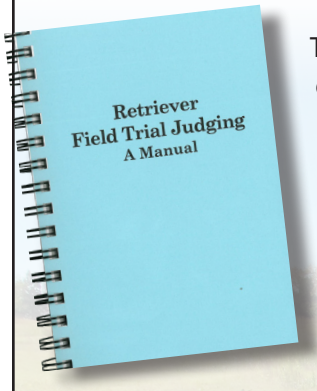

This manual represents the group effort of a number of field trialers across the country who, among themselves, represent more than 300 years in field trial competition, close to 1,000 points as field trial judges.

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